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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HARARE 000450

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SUBJECT: ZIMBABWE: SIMBA MAKONI ON PRESIDENTIAL SUCCESSION

REF: A) HARARE 409 B) HARARE 433 C) HARARE 347

Classified By: political section chief Matt Harrington. Reasons: 1.5 (B) and (D).

Summary

1. (C) Former Finance Minister Simba Makoni said the recently-announced modest fuel hike and announcement of an export support mechanism were supported by every ZANU-PF politburo member except Information Minister Jonathan Moyo, but the measures were unlikely to have much of an effect on Zimbabwe's imploding economy. Makoni acknowledged ongoing discussions within the ruling party about presidential succession, but said these were unlikely to lead anywhere until President Mugabe endorses them. Asked whether it was possible to forestall financial sanctions with a bilateral dialogue, the Ambassador emphasized that ZANU-PF would have to be prepared to address all issues of mutual concern, including the legitimacy of the current Zimbabwean government. Since his dismissal as Finance Minister in 2002, a growing number of ruling party insiders are convinced that Makoni is the only individual capable of resolving Zimbabwe's political and economic crises and ensuring ZANU-PF's continued hold on power. End Summary.

Recent economic measures

2. (C) On February 27, the Ambassador and polchief met with former Finance Minister -- and serving member of the ZANU-PF Politburo -- Simba Makoni in the business office he runs with his wife. Asked about the significance of recent economic steps announced by the GOZ -- including the modest fuel price hike and a new export support mechanism -- Makoni said the increasing desperation of Zimbabwe's economic decline had finally forced the Government's hand. These steps were long overdue but nothing new -- he had pressed for them while at Finance. Interestingly, he said virtually everyone in the Politburo supported them this time, including previously vociferous opponents such as Minister for Agriculture Joseph Made. The lone holdout, according to Makoni, had been chief ZANU-PF propagandist Jonathan Moyo, but he had been overruled. Makoni feared that the recent steps were too little too late and would have little impact on this country's economic implosion. The doubling of fuel prices, for instance, would have little effect on fuel availability -- it would simply reduce the GOZ's subsidy obligation by a small percentage.

Succession

3. (C) Makoni acknowledged that there are ongoing discreet discussions among senior ZANU-PF insiders about presidential succession, which seem to have more urgency than similar conversations in the past. This issue, however, remains very much on the "side table" and those pushing it most actively do not appear prepared yet to place it on the "main table." Makoni dismissed recent speculation that some moderate ruling party figures might form a third political party. Most of his ruling party colleagues, he claimed, accept the need for a "broader political consensus." Makoni insisted, however, that "with all due respect to the courage and conviction of our MDC counterparts," political change in Zimbabwe would emerge from within ZANU-PF. That may be the case, the Ambassador commented, but the longer the country's crises are allowed to go on, the more likely it will be that Zimbabweans simply will want ZANU-PF to go. Makoni concurred with that assessment. The Ambassador noted the slew of press reports that two primary factions have formed within ZANU: one led by Speaker of Parliament Emmerson Mnangagwa, who is clearly working to position himself as Mugabe's successor, and the other one comprising those who oppose Mnangagwa but who appear not to have settled on a single candidate. Makoni nodded but offered no comment.

4. (C) According to Makoni, President Mugabe is ensuring that, on succession, he can "have his cake and eat it, too."

Although the Zimbabwean president regularly insists that the party must choose his successor, there is limited precedent for this in ZANU-PF's history. In the late 70's, when Ndabaningi Sithole left the presidency of ZANU-PF, a small group of party insiders met under a tree in Mozambique and chose Mugabe as the successor, a decision that was subsequently rubber-stamped by a party congress. The lesson, Makoni said, is that the party will not make active plans for succession until Mugabe gives the go-ahead, a step he has not yet taken. Makoni said the ruling party's old guard actually comprises a very small group: Mugabe, Vice-Presidents Muzenda and Msika, party chairman John Nkomo, Minister of Defense Sydney Sekeramayi, politburo member and former defense forces chief Solomon Mujuru, and Minister of Rural Resources Joyce Mujuru. Makoni described the latter four as open-minded individuals who realize the depth of Zimbabwe's crises and the need to address them. It is really the first three, he said -- Mugabe, Muzenda, and Msika -- who form the "crust keeping the rest of us down and that we need to break through."

U.S.-Zimbabwe relations

15. (C) Raising recent press reports of looming U.S. financial sanctions on Zimbabwean leaders, Makoni asked whether it was possible to forestall such a move by having "a quiet conversation with us." The Ambassador replied that he is always willing to talk to anyone but cautioned that, for any discussions to lead to improved bilateral relations between the United States and Zimbabwe, there has to be a willingness within ZANU to address all issues of mutual concern, including the legitimacy of the Zimbabwean government. Makoni took the point but cautioned, without elaboration, that progress was likelier if less contentious issues were addressed first.

Comment

16. (C) Among his senior ZANU-PF colleagues, Makoni is a breath of fresh air. He never feeds us his party's tired rhetoric, but freely acknowledges the depth of the crises facing Zimbabwe and has good ideas about how to resolve them. As Finance Minister, his public candor about Zimbabwe's challenges and the required solutions earned him a dismissal from Cabinet and lingering distrust from party hardliners. Since his departure from Government last fall, however, Makoni has begun to gain popularity with many ZANU stalwarts who see him as their only hope of maintaining the ruling party's hold on power. Even his public comments of last week published in the independent "Daily News" that ZANU-PF must talk to the MDC to resolve the country's crisis were ground-breaking. While acknowledging that succession is the informal topic du jour among ZANU-PF insiders, Makoni adroitly avoided addressing his own role in such discussions. He seemed much more relaxed than the last time we saw him; life in the private sector, where he and his wife run a lingerie manufacturing/retail business, clearly agrees with him.

SULLIVAN